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## **Guatemalan gang members will appear on reality show become small business owners**

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By JUAN CARLOS LLORCA, Associated Press Writer

Forget "Big Brother" and "The Bachelor." Instead of watching people brush their teeth or go on a date, Guatemalan television viewers are going to see tough former gang members become small business owners.

The five-episode reality gang show dubbed "Challenge 10: Peace for the Ex," sponsored by area businesses and the **United States Agency for International Development**, or USAID, will air on Guatemalan television in March.

Viewers will witness how 10 former gangsters lived together for two weeks in the same house, where volunteers taught them basic skills in accounting, customer service, human resources, sales, marketing, and motivation.

At the end of the show, the gangsters establish a car wash and a shoe repair business, both of which will be inaugurated this Friday.

"Killing them and making them disappear is not the solution. Nor are there sufficient jails to put them all behind bars," said project participant and USAID representative Harold Sibaja. "So we have to give them a chance."

The gang members participating in the show already had abandoned gang life, some by joining an evangelical church. Under gang rules, religion and death are the only legitimate ways to get out of gangs.

One of the churches is located in the city of Palin, about 30 kilometers (20 miles) southeast of the capital, Guatemala City. Several gang members there adopted Christianity last year after an angry mob of residents killed three fellow gang members for allegedly threatening local students.

Carlos Zuniga, president of Guatemala's usually conservative agricultural association, sponsored

five of the gang members for the reality show.

"I'm not the same person I was (before the show) and I want this change that I experienced to reach other Guatemalans," Zuniga said, adding that the most important part of the social experiment was teaching the gang members motivation.

"They have grown up hearing that they are scum, and for them to be successful as businessmen, they have to believe in themselves," he said.

Half of the gang members will dedicate themselves to washing cars in the parking lot of a housewares store in the center of the capital, while the other half have established a small shoeshine and repair shop to be located in an upscale office building in a residential neighborhood.

"Many young people are able to give up gangs by joining a church, but no one will give them jobs," Sibaja said. "They are just there with bibles in their hands. ... The lack of opportunities motivates them again as gangsters."

Local businesses donated clothing and shoes to the effort, while a hotel organized a dinner for the 10 ex-gang members.

Luis Marroquin, 24, used to belong to the Mara Salvatrucha gang, but was putting the finishing touches on the car wash on Thursday.

"I wanted to join the "Mara" because they had money, drugs and women," Marroquin recalled. "I became the leader of my gang, but God finally found me and thanks to Him, my mother worries less and can see I'm working now."

Sergio Gutierrez, who will be in charge of the car wash, knows that running a small business will be harder than the two-week taping period. "Now that the (taping of) the show is over, is when the hard part will come," Gutierrez said. "We have to make the business work, but I know if we trust in God, He will help us."

Recent opinion polls show that gangs and gang-related crime are among Guatemalans' chief concerns. Officials estimate there are about 8,000 gang members in the country.

On Thursday, authorities said they had found the bodies of six presumed gang members, all of whom had been strangled, in two separate locations on the outskirts of the city.

A resident of the area, who refused to give a name for fear of repercussions, told The Associated Press that the gang members who operate in the zone where the bodies were found routinely extorted residents and threatened schoolchildren.

The bodies of numerous gang members, many showing signs of torture, have shown up in various parts of the country during the past year. Police attribute the deaths to inter-gang warfare, while human rights groups complain that authorities are conducting a "social cleansing" campaign.